

Gifted Child Quarterly

<http://gcq.sagepub.com/>

Myth 3: A Family of Identification Myths : Your Sample Must Be the Same as the Population. There Is a "Silver Bullet" in Identification. There Must Be "Winners" and "Losers" in Identification and Programming

Carolyn M. Callahan

Gifted Child Quarterly 2009 53: 239

DOI: 10.1177/0016986209346826

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/53/4/239>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



National Association for Gifted Children

Additional services and information for *Gifted Child Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://gcq.sagepub.com/content/53/4/239.refs.html>

Myth 3: A Family of Identification Myths

Your Sample Must Be the Same as the Population.

**There Is a “Silver Bullet” in Identification. There Must Be
“Winners” and “Losers” in Identification and Programming.**

Carolyn M. Callahan

Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

The evolution of several interrelated myths reflects a combination of misinterpretation of statistics, the commendable intention of ensuring that bias and prejudice do not play roles in the provision of services to underrepresented populations of gifted students, and misapplication of programming options for gifted students. Separately, these myths might be named:

Your sample must be the same as the population.

There is a silver bullet for identification of minority or low income students.

There must be “winners” and “losers” in identification and programming for gifted students.

If we work backward from the myth that there must be “winners” and “losers” in the identification and programming for gifted students, we can see how the other myths have evolved. Although the field of gifted education has made great strides in its literature and in the application of theory and research in the development of identification protocols, programming options, and curricular offerings for the gifted, the persistence of the winner/loser myth is traceable to continued use of outdated practices as well as state and local policy. First, consider the subtle (and not so subtle) messages that identification is more important than service as reflected in state policies that mandate identification, but not services; in school system budgets that allocate more funds to the purchase of tests than to curricular development and materials; in state guidelines that devote five or six times as much space and have ten times the number of guidelines for identification than for programming or curricular intervention. These practices and policies lead to continued perceptions that the label of giftedness

continues to be the most important aspect of gifted education.

Second, the persistence of programming options that are based on labeling or creating groups of perceived “elite students” contributes to the sense that other students must be losers. In cases where schools use identification practices to create instructional groupings without a dedication to provision of curriculum in which other students couldn’t, wouldn’t, or shouldn’t be expected to be successful (Passow, 1982), the resulting curricula consisting of “fun” options available to a select few will contribute to the justifiable conclusion that all students should have access to that curriculum. After all, if the curriculum offered to students identified as gifted is one in which other students could do the work; are willing to engage in the type of learning offered; and should be given the opportunity to learn (e.g., critical or analytical thinking), then all students should have access.

Finally, in schools that fail to create effective programs for talent development and do not provide scaffolding and/or transition programs for minority, second-language, or low-income students who exhibit the potential for success in highly complex, accelerated, and in-depth study, gifted programs will continue to be viewed as a means of tracking the haves and have-nots. And, when the curriculum offered to students who are not identified as needing special services is substandard and based on achievement of only minimal standards or the instruction is so poor that students seek “escape” from the classroom, those

Author’s Note: Please address correspondence to Carolyn M. Callahan, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400277, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4277; e-mail: cmc@virginia.edu.

who are not given other options will come to view those who do have the opportunity for engaging, rigorous, and relevant curriculum as the winners in the school game. It may seem that gifted education cannot assume responsibilities for the last two circumstances, but so long as the field does not lend its time, talent and expertise to addressing *all* these issues, the perception of winners and losers will likely persist.

Policies and practices that lead to the perception of winners and losers combined with statistical misunderstanding and misinterpretation leads to the myth that the sample must be the same as the population. As Treffinger (1982) noted in his response to this myth, many educators fail to understand that the distributions of students with a given characteristic at any grade level, in any school or in any school district may or may not reflect the distribution of that characteristic or trait in the general population. Although we must all recognize that overall the distribution of students who need gifted services or have the potential to demonstrate gifted behaviors is not limited to any economic, ethnic, cultural, or racial group, we should not expect that in any given school those characteristics will be present in a given percentage in every setting. Reflect on the commonly accepted clause in the federal definition of gifted students, "They [gifted students] require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools" (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 3). The many factors that affect development of gifted behaviors and leading to such needs will result in great variability across settings in the composition of a sample of identified students. For example, the level of curriculum offered in a given school may mean that the majority of students who would not be challenged in School A are challenged and engaged by the curriculum in School B. Further, as Robinson (2003) clearly articulated, social inequities and poverty are reflected in quality of educational preparation, instruction in the early school grades, and subsequent levels of performance in our schools. To expect a simple gifted identification process to counter these inequities is a simplistic and ill-fated notion.

Unfortunately, acceptance of the myth that there is a "silver bullet" that will remediate the social and economic inequities has led to indefensible practices in identification. Among the practices that have been held up as *the answer* are reconceptualizations of giftedness which misinterpret theory, use of matrices to determine program eligibility and placement, and use of scores from instruments that promise to

identify more minority and low income students, but are based on limited validity evidence. The first practice, reconceptualization of giftedness is based on sound observations that the definition of giftedness simply as general intellectual ability is too narrow and inadequate for recognizing the multiple areas in which humans exhibit gifted behavior. However, the translation of the recognition of the importance of recognizing alternate talents has, at times, involved approaches such as adopting Gardner's (1983/1993) model of multiple intelligences as if the "intelligences" were independent and easily assessed as uncorrelated constructs despite Gardner's acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of the underlying constructs and little evidence of success in creating valid assessments to measure the dimensions outlined. The more serious and grievous practice is to use the underlying conceptions as dimensions of giftedness in the identification process and then place students in traditional gifted programs offering curricula based on the verbal paradigms that have always characterized schools—not even offering the multiple intelligence entry point options described by Gardner (1999) as best serving those with a given intelligence *strength or preference*.

The search for the "silver bullet" has also resulted in the use of matrices, which appear to diminish the influence of intelligence and achievement test scores in the identification of gifted students. However, the use of matrices that assign weights to particular ranges of intelligence or achievement test scores does not accomplish that goal unless there is as much variability in other assessment tools as there is for the standardized test scores. Furthermore, the use of matrices with a cut-off score for placement begs the question of whether a given total score on a matrix indicates need for a differentiated learning environment or curriculum.

The most recent search for the "silver bullet" has been the widespread acceptance of measures of ability based on spatial and/or nonverbal reasoning. The rationale offered (the domains measured by traditional intelligence tests are too narrow and limited) is not questioned when one considers the many domains in which human talent is manifest. However, the particular instruments that have been widely accepted and the use of scores from those instruments in placement of low-income and minority students must be questioned. In particular, no evidence has been offered that use of scores from these instruments is valid in placement. Do students selected using a measure of spatial ability or nonverbal ability succeed

in gifted programs or is there longitudinal evidence that the students identified demonstrate gifted behaviors in any domain? Are the placements of gifted students identified through use of such instruments differentiated to ensure that the “abilities” identified will match the curriculum offered? More seriously, the reliance on nontraditional measures subtly suggests we do not believe that low income and minority students are capable of high performance on traditional instruments or in traditionally school-related areas of performance.

To dispel these myths, individually or as a set, requires a new commitment of the field of gifted education. First, although we must acknowledge that performance on standardized instruments may be lower for particular groups of students, we can begin to examine indicators of success by looking for the highest scorers with a subgroup on traditional assessments and recognizing that such high potential given the social and economic barriers these students face is an indicator of gifted behavior. Second, we can provide the scaffolding and transitional curriculum for these students that will bring their performance in line with potential and we can be the leaders in creating talent development programs at the pre-K through primary grades that will give students from all subgroups the opportunity to develop the behaviors that allow for success in verbal and quantitative domains. We can also recognize talent across other domains, but we must develop both the assessments that validly predict success in the identified domains and the curriculum that will be effective in developing those

talents. Finally, we must participate in creating programs and curriculum that are truly challenging, rigorous, and engaging for all students and then develop curriculum and offer instruction that is differentiated appropriately in depth, complexity, rigor, and challenge for those whose learning rate and level of insight and understanding demand different educational options.

References

- Gardner, H. (1983/1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gardner, H. (1999). *The disciplined mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Passow, A. H. (1982). Differentiated curricula for the gifted/talented. In *Curricula for the gifted: Selected proceedings for the First National Conference on Curricula for the Gifted/Talented* (pp. 4-20). Ventura, CA: National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and Talented.
- Robinson, N. M. (2003). Two wrongs do not make a right: Sacrificing the needs of gifted students does not solve society's unsolved problems. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 26, 252-273.
- Treffinger, D. J. (1982). Your sample must be the same as your population. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 26, 15-16.
- Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. (1993). *National excellence: A case for developing America's talent*. Washington, DC: Author.

Carolyn M. Callahan, PhD, is Commonwealth Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Her current research interests include the study of gifted women and Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.